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JOHN LOFTON'S JOURNAL

Ducking questions is an easy way out

Debategate! Ethics! Morality! Legality! Pilfered papers! Moles! All fascinating stuff. And yes, let's be honest, also fun stuff — as long as those of us in the media are asking the questions. But, when we are asked questions about these kinds of things, well, let's just say it's neither nearly so fascinating nor quite as much fun.



On a recent Panorama program, host Maury Povich discussed debategate with columnist Jack Anderson, attorney Melvin Belli and Daniel Schorr of the Cable News Network. Said Povich to Anderson: Do you feel you have ever conducted yourself unethically or criminally by receiving government documents? Before Anderson can reply, Schorr interrupts saying: "I wouldn't answer that if I were you." Everybody laughs.

Ducking Povich's question, Anderson does tell us what he says is exactly the way he feels: "The news doesn't belong to the government. The news belongs to the people." When Povich persists, asking Anderson but what about the government's documents, Anderson ignores this pointed query. Later on, Anderson reiterates his view that "if government owns the news, we're in trouble."

Well, now. If I were Mr. Anderson, I too would stonewall any questions regarding my own journalistic ethics and morality. In December 1974, after four days of hearings concerning the unauthorized disclosure and transmittal of classified documents, the Senate Armed Services Committee issued a report about what it called leaks to the press of "highly sensitive information" which were "a serious compromise to national security decision-making," leaks which were "massive and of a serious consequence."

In a section titled "Material Facts," this report declared: "Information from at least 70 highly sensitive classified documents were disclosed by Jack Anderson in his newspaper column between Dec. 13, 1971, and February of 1972." The information published by Anderson dealt with such subjects as: the Indo-Pakistan war; the military situation in Cambodia; American B-52 strikes in Laos; and other secret material revealing "information regarding U.S. military movements."

In 1973, both The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal reported that an important U.S. intelligence project — Gamma Guppy — was terminated after some of its details were revealed in an Anderson column. Gamma Guppy was an extremely sensitive operation in which the CIA monitored the conversations between top Soviet leaders as they drove around in their limousines. The Post story quoted one former intelligence official as saying that what Anderson did was "completely gratuitous — it served no purpose and blew our best intelligence source in the Soviet Union."

Anderson, of course, vehemently denies almost everything. He tells me that at "no time" did he ever report anything about Gamma Guppy "at least until it had been reported elsewhere." He is unable however to supply me with any report about this operation which predates his own revelations.

Anderson says that following his report alluding to conversations inside the Kremlin, he was visited by the head of the CIA, Richard Helms, who said that (surprise!) Gamma Guppy was supposed to be a secret. Anderson says that he asked Helms what he had asked his own source: why is this operation secret since transcripts of the Kremlin conversations show that the Russians knew we were listening to them? Still, Anderson says, Helms asked him not to go into the details of this operation "and therefore I did not."

In another conversation with Helms, Anderson says he was again asked not to make any further reference to Gamma Guppy, something Helms had heard Anderson might be doing in a book. Saying that Helms "admitted" the Russians knew the CIA was tapping their limousine phones, Anderson says he gave Helms the benefit of the doubt however and agreed not to mention Gamma Guppy any more. Anderson says the only thing Helms asked him not to do was reveal exactly where he had obtained his information about Gamma Guppy.

Helms, as one may have already anticipated, disagrees with Anderson's recollection of these events. In fact, he denies it. In an interview, he says he "never" told Anderson the Russians knew about Gamma Guppy. Helms says flatly: "I never would've said this." He says it is his impression that he would not have attempted to persuade Anderson to shut up about Gamma Guppy if the Soviets already knew about it. And Helms adds rather emphatically that he does not believe the Soviets did know their limousine phones were being tapped.

As Helms recalls it, the first allusion in the press to Gamma Guppy was by Anderson. And the former CIA director concludes our conversation with the perceptive observation that "tangling with Jack Anderson is like tangling with a rattlesnake — you never know where you're going to be attacked next."

Well put, Mr. Ambassador, well put. We are fortunate to have had a man such as Richard Helms in the service of our nation for so long, a man who obviously knew his craft and a man who obviously remains more than up to speed on the journalistic reptiles among us who — in the long run — pose a far greater danger to the First Amendment than does our government.